

EMBEDDED METAPHOR

By MICHELE DE ST. SAUVEUR

Florida is a fun-in-the-sun, tan-till-you're-done, and then-take-a-nap kind of place. However, a good snooze was not engendered by "Embedded Metaphor," a complex look at the concept of "bed" that was funny, sexy, and downright disturbing. A statement from the introductory text for the exhibition--"The study of sleep is wonder; the study of bed is fear"--suggests the reason why: When awake, we have a nasty habit of projecting our anxieties outward from the body onto someone or something else; in this case it is our beds, which bear powerful traces of the very thing from which we distance ourselves, the body. Curator Nina Felshin chose beds as provocative metaphors, engaging a variety of issues: homelessness, AIDS, sex, religion, childhood, and ethnic identity.

The confused "child within" appears in Janet Bigg's Crib, in which a circle of stuffed Clydesdale horses rallies around a highly elevated girlie-girl baby crib; in Postcolonial Kinderhood, Elaine Reich's undersized canopy bed is surrounded by homespun samplers that speak of the artist's Jewish heritage suppressed by a culturally genteel upbringing. In the sociopolitical arena is Perry Bard's Shelter, photographs of shelter sites for the homeless made of cardboard boxes and blankets. With similar focus, Rikrit Tiravanija offers Bali Soap, a bright orange foam mattress covered in a slightly worn blanket and holding a small bar of soap. Not intended for the sleepy, sun-seeking visitor, this "bed" speaks of the displaced immigrant for whom a vacation is a distant concept.

Catherine Saalfield and Zoë Leonard provide Keep Your Laws Off My Body. Here a visually charged video, full of inflammatory right-wing remarks intermingled with gay male sexual interplay, and text-laden bed sheets combine to create a strong comment on the state of late-'80s gay-rights activism. Mel Chin approaches the issue of religious and political freedom with Jilava Prison Bed. A crucifix-shaped mattress and frame of bedding, steel, dirty linen, and stakes that rip through at the terminating points of the cross represents a Romanian priest incarcerated for his beliefs, who went on a hunger strike.

Lauren Lesko's Coifed, a sensuous fainting couch covered in fuzzy black Mongolian lambskin, is a good looking object with a subtle feminist spin. Oliver Herring's Castle, created by knitting transparent Mylar, is a radiant memorial for the deceased drag queen Ethyl Eichelberger. These two works--playful, beauty-oriented, but with a point--signify one trend in art practice of the '90s. In a blend of '80s in-your-face art with a cooler, object-driven '90s orientation, "Embedded Metaphor" tracked our relationship with our beds, ourselves, our fears, and most of all, our consciences.